

Session 5 The War:

Fighting for Hitler or for Germany?



In three
parts

1. War context: Hitler's "truce"
2. The Protestant experience
3. The Catholic experience



Hitler's wartime truce with the churches

- The Concordat, though often violated, never cancelled.
- But not extended to conquered eastern territories, as a sop to Nazi radicals.
- Hitler tells radicals “cut the anti-clerical nonsense.”
- He defers “settling of accounts” until after the war (see his “Table Talk”).

Government pressure continued regardless

- Risks of speaking too boldly (cf. Fr. Lichtenberg's fate)
- Seizure of properties of religious orders
- Reduction of financial subsidies
- Restrictions on Mass time, end of Sunday rest
- Confessional schools already closed; kindergarten taken from church control
- Religious ed stopped in common (public) high schools

Clergy and religious in military service

- No chaplains in Air Force or SS units
- Clergy and religious not protected by Concordat annex were drafted
- Most were medics, many killed, perhaps 1150 priests killed or MIA
- Protestant clergy casualties 1939-43: 22 chaplains, 789 pastors, 489 vicars, 1500 seminarians
- 1767 pastors' sons – a married clergy, remember
- Of Bonhoeffer's c. 150 students at Finkenwalde, over 80 killed

Protestantism and the outbreak of war

- No great enthusiasm for another war
- Czech crisis in fall 1938 nearly caused a coup led by the military
- Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law and a lawyer for Abwehr, collected trial evidence
- But Munich Conference ended immediate risk of war
- Probably the most realistic opportunity for a successful coup

Why did they fight?

- Sept 1939: Confessing Church clergy & seminarians served when called
- Patriotism, fighting for one's country, not for the Nazi regime
- Martin Niemöller: offered to leave prison to serve his country
- Religious sanction: "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Romans 13)
- "Illegals" and seminarians wanted to protect widows' pensions
- No tradition of conscientious objection
- The Wehrmacht could be a cover for them

Confessing Church leaders who knew it was “a criminal war”

- Karl Barth (from his Swiss home): how could Christians fight each other?
- Herman Stöhr: executed for refusal to serve
- Helmut Gollwitzer: served as a medic but knew it was an unjust war
- Albrecht Schönherr: “a criminal war”
- Eberhard Bethge: the “Commissar Order” proved the injustice
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer: found an army haven but joined the resistance

The bishops' reticence: some reasons

- Fear of causing another Kulturkampf and cancellation of the Concordat.
- Preoccupation with maintaining unity inhibited action.
- Cardinal Bertram, primate of the German hierarchy, as obstacle.
- Weakening of 1943 letter on deportation and murder of the Jews.
- Bishops' commitment to be a *Volkskirche* meant they could not get too far ahead of their people.

Interwar pacifism in the U.S. and Germany

- Pacifism in 1930s U.S. Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day; Minnesota parallel.
- Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*.
- German Peace Fellowship – Cardinal Faulhaber its clerical protector.
- Faulhaber on modern warfare's contradictions with just-war doctrine, because of weapons alone.
- Nazis dissolved the German Peace Fellowship. Faulhaber was silent.

Gordon Zahn's story: pacifist and scholar-activist

- World War II pacifist; spent war in a Catholic Worker service camp.
- Harassed at St. John's, welcomed at St. Thomas.
- Hitched on with Eugene McCarthy at start of his political career.
- Went with him to Washington, where he earned a Ph.D. at CUA.
- Earned a Fulbright to study German pacifist experience.
- He found only seven, six of whom were executed.

Franz Jägerstätter: Austrian conscientious objector

- His story recovered by Zahn; see *In Solitary Witness*.
- Jägerstätter not a pacifist but an ardent anti-Nazi.
- Refused call-up for service because he thought Hitler's wars unjust.
- Received no support from his church. Executed August 9, 1943.
- His widow Franziska denied a pension for five years after the war.
- She lived to be 100 and attended his beatification in 2007 in the Linz cathedral – whose bishop had advised Jägerstätter to serve.
- Terrence Malick film *A Hidden Life* is about the two of them.

Zahn's revised thesis: making lemonade out of a lemon

- People told him they knew at the time the wars were unjust.
- He examined episcopal teaching to see what they were teaching.
- His book a moral examination of conscience on nationalism and just-war doctrine.
- Hostility in Germany to his research.
- German Catholicism had presented itself as victim and survivor, and bulwark of a new, democratic West Germany.
- Zahn's difficulty publishing his book and teaching at a Catholic school

The critique of just-war doctrine

- Total war of a modern type is unjust by the Church's own standards.
- Cardinal Faulhaber had already said that at Geneva in 1932.
- Nuclear arms as weapons already an issue in Germany in 1957.
- Condemned by Catholics because of proportionality and non-combatant immunity.
- Air war already demonstrating the threat in Spain and Ethiopia.
- Zahn's testimony on nukes important at Vatican II.

Pacifism and just-war in Catholic tradition

- Early Christianity opposed to shedding of blood & military service.
- But firmly “pacifist?” Christians found in Roman army by c. 170.
- Did Constantine’s conversion force doctrine to conform to practice?
- Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), church historian & apologist for Constantine.
- Two classes of Christians, ascetical elite and married people in the world.
- Augustine and Ambrose of Milan import classical just-war doctrine

Critique of just-war doctrine


- Just-war doctrine still Catholic teaching (*Catechism* ##2307-2313).
- Criticized because it was always used to defend, not critique, war.
- Example used by Zahn: in WWII, American Catholics were told they could *not* object if a war were declared just.
- Catholic teaching (still) says prudent judgment on that is in the hands of those responsible for the common good (*Catechism* #2309).
- Zahn found no evidence that the bishops ever doubted the wars were just.

German bishops' defense of Hitler's wars

- The three-fold myth of *Volk*, *Vaterland*, and *Heimat* (Homeland) dominated the bishops' messages, acc. to Zahn.
- Catholics told a soldier who dies for his people is assured of salvation.
- Bishop Galen of Münster: acc. to Aquinas, a believing soldier's death in battle equal in merit with a martyr's.
- Archbishop Gröber of Freiburg: death for the Fatherland "erases whatever remains of sin and guilt on the soul."

How it might have resonated with laypeople:
“The Way of the Soldier Johannes”

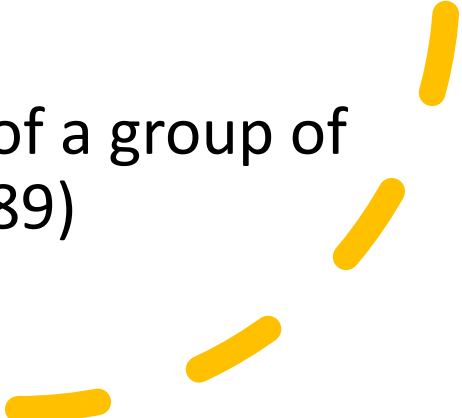
- A popular book among German Catholics on soldier’s death as a martyr’s death.
- Hans Niermann, young Catholic leader and soldier, killed in France.
- His notes and memories of his comrades published as a book.
- General secretary of Young Catholic Men’s Assn. edited and shaped the content, we now know.
- Even so, Niermann probably did equate military duty with *militia Christi* – though unconnected with duty to Hitler.

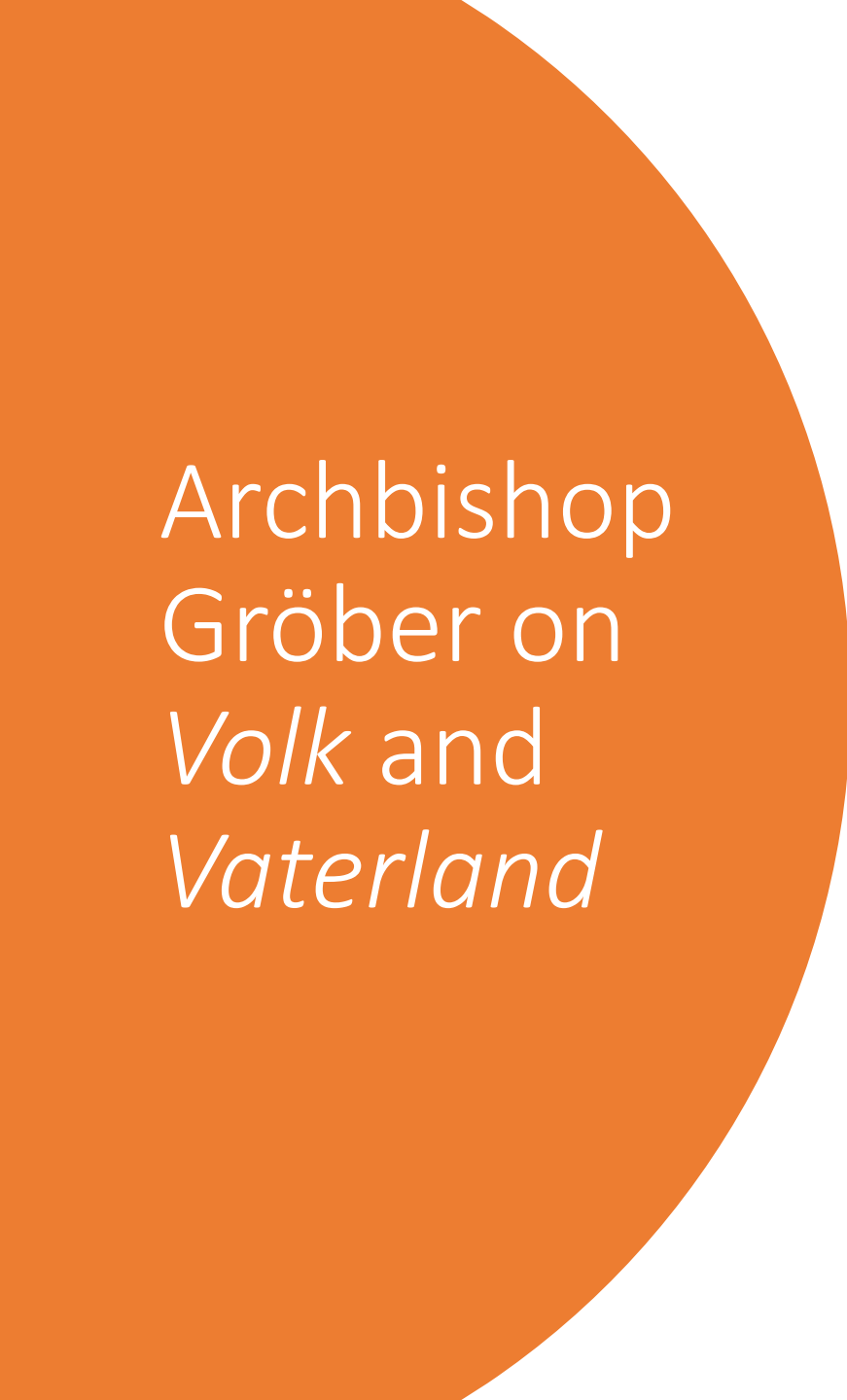


A confused moral and spiritual climate?

“With such questions [about the justice of the war] were we, along with our whole Catholic milieu, never confronted. We swam in a sea of *Volk*, *Vaterland*, and *Gottesreich*, of battle, blood, and death, of duty and courage and loyalty, of honor and heroism – who could sort out what that referred to? To God’s soldiers, to the Fatherland’s soldiers? To the Führer’s soldiers? To the Führer’s soldier in our milieu was that not done in so many words. But who could in reality make the distinction...”

(Christel Biemann, b. 1921, director of a group of young Catholic women, writing in 1989)



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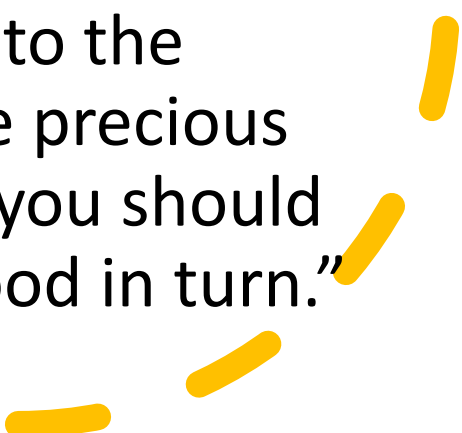
Archbishop Gröber on *Volk* and *Vaterland*

“You belong to the German *Volk* as its guardian and protector. Blood, language, culture, natural love and other ties...bind you to it. Thus, you live in the *Volk*. By the same token, the *Volk* lives in you...

And you assume this all-encompassing service as a duty sworn under oath in God’s sight!

Should one or another of you lose his life...It is the ultimate offering to *Vaterland* and *Volk*.

In this way, you redeem your debt to the German *Volk* in full. It gave you the precious heritage of its glorious blood, and you should offer it your own precious life’s blood in turn.”

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The bishops' defense of the war

- The war as a rectifier of the wrongs of Versailles.
- The war as a defense against encirclement and as securing of *Lebensraum* (living space) lost in the colonies.
- After June 1941, the war was against godless Bolshevism.
- Bishop Galen's March 1942 pastoral letter called it a "crusade" against "a satanic ideological system."
- Archbishop Jaeger of Paderborn: the Soviet Union was "the turf of human beings whose hostility to God and hatred of Christianity have degraded them to a bestial level."

The war as divine punishment

- As the war wore on, common to see it as a divinely sent discipline and punishment.
- Not as a punishment for the German people or its armies for crimes.
- But a punishment for secularization and loss of faith in God in personal and national life.
- Even afterwards, little evidence of remorse for the war itself.
- Galen on the soldierly dead, who “even amidst the carnage of war kept heart and hand clean of hatred, plunder, and unjust acts of violence.” (June 1945)